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U.S. Policy Towards Iran: The Post-Khomeini Era

By all accounts, there is considerable political turmoil in Iran, over the conduct of the war with Iraq, and also concerning a potential succession crisis. The extent to which this crisis has been accelerated due to Khomeini's recent ill health remains a matter of speculation. Nevertheless, we need to think through carefully what actions, if any, the United States should take in anticipation of a change of leadership in Iran.

While there are many options as to what could happen, it is unlikely that a pro-Western -- let alone pro-American -- leadership will emerge in the first instance. Rather we can probably anticipate a power struggle among the clerical leaders which could, if protracted, tempt the Soviet Union to play a more assertive role to exploit the power vacuum. Clearly this is something we want to avoid, but in such a way as to not precipitate a crisis if at all possible. There are also many other scenarios involving the future role of the Iranian Army and the activities of other countries which need to be considered.

In view of the importance of Iran to our Southwest Asia interests, it is necessary that we address some of the likely scenarios for dealing with the succession in Iran and develop options on how to proceed before, during, and after Khomeini's death.

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The State Department is requested to chair an interagency group in close cooperation with the Department of Defense and the CIA to formulate the scenarios and options. Among the questions to be addressed are the following:

- Likely scenarios for leadership succession in Iran and their impact on (a) relations with the Soviet Union, (b) the Iran/Iraq war, (c) the Arab world, and (d) the United States and the West.
- Options open to the United States to develop better relations with Iran after Khomeini's death.
- The extent to which we should make more use of third parties, such as Turkey, India, Pakistan, China, Japan, Algeria, and the United Kingdom, who presently have better links with Iran than we do. The extent to which we should engage in low-key discussions with some of these countries to see if there are any joint actions we can consider for the pre/post-Khomeini era.
- A specific set of recommendations on how to handle the Soviet dimension -- in particular, to what extent we can try influence/deter any Soviet precipitous actions in Iran.

A paper should be prepared for SIG review no later than September 15.

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